Policy board sets aside $7 million for education reform

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The state’s public school policy board set aside nearly $7 million Thursday for an “education reform package” that the board hopes to work out with Gov.-elect Buddy Roemer next year.

The money was carved from a special $23 million school improvement budget — next year’s interest earnings on a permanent trust fund that Louisiana voters created last year to ensure a constant source of funds for school enhancement.

The Board of Elementary and Secondary Education approved a list of general spending priorities for the fund after resisting attempts to erode the still-undetailed “reform package.” Board leaders said they want to have some money available to finance the early stages of an education improvement plan that Roemer promises to enact next year.

“We want to be able to get something started immediately,” said board president-elect Keith Johnson of New Orleans.

Roemer has promised, among other things, higher pay and better evaluation of school teachers and extra help for disadvantaged students as part of a plan to improve Louisiana schools — a key, Roemer says, to the rejuvenation of Louisiana’s economy.

Roemer has appointed an advisory committee to work out a detailed education plan for presentation to the Legislature, which convenes in April.

Johnson said board members will meet with Roemer in hopes of reaching agreement in a plan that can be financed by the so-called 8g fund.

The $7 million won’t be nearly enough to finance Roemer’s plan, which he has estimated at about $285 million a year. But it will help initiate new programs at a time when money is scarce.

The board also voted to spend 8g funds for programs to especially help kindergarten through third graders, offer extra instruction to low achievers, pay tuition for teachers who go back to school, train principals to better manage their schools, test public school students, aid trade schools and provide scholarships for bright students who attend Louisiana colleges.

The board voted to increase, from $2 million to $3 million, funds for vocational-technical education. The vo-tech schools have been hard hit by budget cuts.